



THE MISCONCEPTION OF Generational Differences

A few months ago, Bruce Springsteen and The E Street Band put on an impressive concert in the meadow at Werchter, Belgium. My daughter and I, 26 and 58 years of age, respectively, were awestruck. A week later, we attended a Harry Styles concert. She suggested one event and I the other. It's easy to guess who chose which. The average age of attendees and the predominant color of their clothing at each concert differed notably. Does this signify a generational difference? Does a Generation X individual naturally gravitate toward Bruce Springsteen and a member of Generation Z prefer Harry Styles? What exactly defines a generation?

The concept of generational gaps is widely discussed. The dismissive phrase *okay, boomer* is ubiquitous, as is the stereotype that millennials are latte-sipping job-hoppers. Marketing and social media often emphasize perceived generational conflicts even in professional environments. Human resource debates frequently start with the question, "How do you manage five generations in one workplace?" Focusing on generational differences, however, might be less relevant than we think. The idea that people born around the same time share characteristics and values has little basis in science. Differences within generations can be more significant than those between generations. Ancestry; social class; race and ethnicity; sex, gender, and sexual orientation; and education level often influence people more than the year of their birth.

Age-based differences exist nevertheless. Socrates, 2,500 years ago, observed young people's penchant for luxury, disdain for authority, and lack of respect for elders. Perhaps the difference in perspectives between the young and the old is a timeless phenomenon.

Age can be considered in terms of birth year, chronological age, and life stage. Which of the following influences my current perspective and actions more significantly: having been born in 1965, my current age, or living in 2023 with its unique challenges?

In his book *Das Problem der Generationen* (English translation: *The Problem of Generations*),¹ the German sociologist Karl Mannheim suggests that people are shaped primarily by their social context and historical events but that their individual reactions to these influences vary significantly. For example, all of us experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, but our responses to it varied widely. In what researchers refer to as the *age-period-cohort model*, the young always differ from the old (*age*), a significant event affects everyone (*period*), and the experiences of individuals in a particular year can be meaningfully studied (*cohort*).

Mannheim wrote his book in 1928. Almost 100 years later, we are grappling with the same topic. The real issue, however, is that we continue to perceive generational differences as a problem. ■

1. Mannheim K. *Das Problem der Generationen*. Dunker & Humblot; 1928.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erik L. Mertens', with a long, sweeping underline.

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